New York
Theatre Critics' Reviews
1955

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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Catch a Star!"

DAILY NEWS

September 7, 1955

New Revue, 'Catch a Star,' Opens Season, and Helen Halpin Stars

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The task of opening a new Broadway theatrical season fell to a revue called "Catch a Star" at the Plymouth Theatre last evening. This event will not be called memorable in stage annals, but it was cheerful, and the show got better and funnier as it went along.

Unless it is extraordinary, a revue is a hit-or-miss affair in its structure—a song here, a sketch there, and then a dance. Most of the first act of "Catch a Star" is more miss than hit until it gets to a sketch called "And Then I Wrote," which is the success story of a struggling young author. Author of what? Of the modern restaurant menu, which can describe a coddled egg or a mess of hash in pure drool.

A little further along is a song, done as a round by a quartet, called "The Story of Alice," which has pleasantly malicious lyrics and serves to introduce the find of the evening—a small, dark-haired singer by the name of Helen Halpin. Soon Miss Halpin reappears with a solo number, "What a Song Can Do," and she brightens up the stage considerably. She is a little like Judy Garland, a little like Nancy Walker—a practically impossible combination, I grant you—and she is very much her individual self.

A Novel Dance

The sketches fool around with takeoffs on the Tennessee Williams type of drama and courts of divorce for no particular point or purpose until they get to one called "Arty," which lampoons a much overrated movie, "Marty." In it Pat Carroll as the mother and Jack Wakefield as her bachelor son are really funny.

Right after the "Arty" number comes an artful one, a song and dance affair called "Twist My Arm," which is most artfully danced up and down a tall step-ladder by Elaine Dunn and Marc Breaux. Three or four items later, Miss Halpin captures her audience again with a song called "Gruntled." She is tired of being disgruntled and inept and yearns to be ept and gruntled.

There is one more sketch worth noticing, in which David Burns, who has wandered in and out of the show as an introducer up to now, becomes the proprietor of a matrimonial agency which is run the way such an enterprise should be run—as a high-class shop for choosy women. Burns, Miss Carroll and the sketch itself are funny.

Excellent Song

Some of the songs are pretty awful. My advice is to pay no attention to several—including one which goes, "That moon is here again . . . It's all too clear again"—and wait almost to the end of the show for one called "Fly Little Heart." This one, I think, is excellent, and is appealingly sung by the same Miss Dunn who has danced on the ladder.

"Catch a Star" is disarming because it is unpretentious. If you don't look too hard and aren't too critical, you'll enjoy quite a bit of it.

"CATCH A STAR"

Musical revue with lyrics by Paul Webster and Ray Golden; music by Sammy Fain and Phil Charig; sketches by Danny and Neil Simon; dances and musical numbers staged by Lee Sherman; settings by Ralph Alswang; costumes by Thomas Becher; staged by Danny Simon; revue coordinated by Robert Nesbitt; conceived and supervised by Ray Golden; presented by Sy Kleinman, September 6, 1955, at the Plymouth Theatre with the following cast: Pat Carroll, David Burns, Elaine Dunn, Marc Breaux, Wayne Sherwood, Jack Wakefield, Undine Forrest, Kay Malone, Denny Desmond, Helen Halpin, Sonny Sparks, Calvin Holt and Trude Adams.

Daily Mirror

September 7, 1955

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'Catch a Star' Bows At the Plymouth

• Talented newcomers generate a lot of laughs in this shooting 'star'.

It was so good to be back in the theatre again Tuesday evening that we were really in there rooting for Ray Golden's "Catch a Star!" to catch a great big sale at the box-office. Yet, as we left the Plymouth, we were—to quote Smith & Dale—"dubious."

For the new arrival, despite excellent intentions, hasn't quite got what it takes. Like most intimate revues of its kind, it offers a lot of young and talented people, some promising sketches, some pleasant music and some well conceived lyrics. But, somehow, they seldom spell h-i-t.

• • •

THE SKITS, mostly by Danny and Neil Simon, have first-rate satiric ideas which fluff out at the end because of weak punchlines. We liked best the kidding of women's matinee clubs, boarding houses rigged to sucker young playwrights, match-making mothers and matrimonial agencies.

Thanks to David Burns, a dynamic veteran; Pat Carroll, a truly clever newcomer; Jack Wakefield, who reminds you a little of Sid Caesar and Helen Halpin, who can make like Nancy Walker—they generate a lot of solid laughs. The Simon boys can come up with funny topical material, and producer Sy Kleinman has found capable kids to sell it.

The lyrics are mostly by Golden and Paul Webster, and the music by Sammy Fain and Phil Charig. The words are often amusing and pointful, though a bit on the arty side, but the tunes are hardly up to the usual Fain and Charig big-time standard. The nearest thing to a pop plug song, incidentally, is "Fly Little Heart," by Jerry Bock and Larry Holofcener.

"ONE HOUR Ahead of the Posse," by Dave Ormont, Golden and Charig, which tells of a gun slick who kills a faithless gal, almost eludes his relentless pursuers only to be shot down a step away from freedom, strikes a dramatic note. It is persuasively sung by Wayne Sherwood, who has a fine voice and remarkable acrobatic skill.

Elaine Dunn, a pert and saucy song-and-dancetress, turns loose a lot of personality on some unprofitable romps. And for looks there's Lillian D'Honau, who would have caught the eye of a Flo Ziegfeld, George White or Earl Carroll.

Ralph Alswang has designed a useful unit setting, which wheels back and forth from one to full-stage. It's in a purple that your eyes can't miss. Nor can Thomas Becher's quite colorful costumes escape them either. Lee Sherman has provided lively hoofing.

• • •

"CATCH A STAR!" strives so hard to please that it is difficult, indeed, to greet it with thumbs down. It has so many ingratiating people involved, people who are going to make their marks in sturdier vehicles, that it's doubly difficult to say "no." But say it we must.

However, it is only fair to report that enthusiastic first-nighters embraced its hilarities and bestowed robust applause on the performers.

If we only liked some of it, they loved it all.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

September 7, 1955

'Catch a Star' Cast Bright and Twinkly

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Most of the audience at "Catch a Star" carried on so enthusiastically last night that you began to suspect they were backers of the new revue.

It is a pleasant little show at the Plymouth, with some very bright moments. But it never really makes you want to turn handsprings, the way the performers do so often.

The performance is casual, and there is a lack of distinctive charm or character to the program, that suggests the performers are too much on their own. They do their specialties, eagerly but without much crisp coordination.

The largest looming figure of the evening is Pat Carroll. She is a comedienne who has marched steadily upward from night clubs to the top of TV and what now amounts to stardom in "Catch a Star."

Mood Changes.

This is a mad clown whose greatest trick springs from lightning changes of mood. She is an excellent actress, at least in flashes, so her comic switches are always solid.

She is at her best in an inspired sketch which manages to satirize all of Tennessee Williams' plays. But she is just about as good playing an Italian mother anxious to marry off her son, or a rich lady buying husbands.

What she does with an O. Henry piece is daring and a surprising success.

No revue can go entirely soft when you know David Burns is coming on again. Here he has little material. But he is the sort of performer who can simply walk across the stage as if someone had written him an ingenious script about how to do it.

Wicked Humor.

Mr. Burns' humor is wicked and penetrating. Here it is tops when he plays a histrionic waiter, or a husband rechant.

Helen Halpin is easily the third most striking member of the company. She is constantly on the verge of delivering a torch song, but always finds it ridiculous before you do. Her "Gruntled," a very amusing idea that kids calypso, drew roars last night.

Elaine Dunn and Marc Breaux have most of the dancing assignments, then turn out to sing almost as well as the specialty vocalists. Trude Adams and Wayne Sherwood have the tonal personalities to handle their ballads neatly.

Fresh and Shiny.

"Catch a Star" looks fresh and shiny, and as if it had been put together pretty quickly. A cowbody drama and a ballet abstractly labeled "Theater Piece" indulge in unnecessary clutter. Most of the ideas ,even the good ones, are worked for more than they are worth.

This is a good natured, even eager little show. It is a pity that there is really no urgent reason to go see it. It is simply outclassed by the comforts of home in this mechanical age, when you can watch as good with your stocking feet up off the floor and a long cool glass in your hand.

Journal-American

September 7, 1955

Revue Has Enthusiasm

Boasts Agreeable Score And Sprightly New Talent

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE NEW season got away to an early start at the Plymouth Theatre last night with presentation of a so-called intimate revue called "Catch a Star." This will not be the best or, certainly, the worst effort of the new semester on Broadway.

It has some sprightly new talent, an agreeable if not distinguished score, a few hilarious sketches and dance numbers and a general atmosphere of enthusiasm.

On the less happy side of the ledger it must be noted that there are protracted unfunny lapses, blackouts that fail to black, a great deal of specialized jokes, and the usual tendency to resort to unnecessary vulgarity in the pinch.

One Old Hand

David Burns, the one veteran in the cast, handles his introductions and sketch duties with the gusto and assurance of an old hand and is usually extremely effective within the limits of his material.

Pat Carroll, the other featured player, is making her bow to Broadway, and regardless of the fate of "Star!" it seems safe to predict she'll become one.

She has a pert and expressive face, an ample figure and the ability to imitate, clown, introduce a number and occasionally resort to something approaching studious acting.

I thought she was at her best in a sketch called "Room for Rent," a quite effective satire on the deep South as interpreted by Tennessee Williams, and "Arty," another vignette apparently based on the movie "Marty," which I have not seen.

I regret that I didn't like her closing number, a solo interpretation of O.Henry's "Gift of the Magi"; it reveals her talents for characterization, but I found the character distasteful.

Among the other young members of the cast there are several good dancers: Elaine Dunn, Marc Breaux, Calvin Holt and Mickey Calin (most of whom also sing); there are also some singers who can dance: Wayne Sherwood and Helen Halpin; a trio of capable comics who do a little of everything: Jack Wakefield, Sonny Sparks and Denny Desmond, and Trude Adams, who only sings, but does it with style. She is entrusted with the show's best number, "To Be Or Not To Be In Love."

Ralph Alswang has done an ingenious job with a small selection of sets and drops which can be transposed to represent almost anything with good effect and a minimum of effort.

Lee Sherman's choreography, dynamic and unpretentious, comes to a rousing climax in "Carnival in Court," a calypso spoof at divorce proceedings.

Regrettably, I don't believe "Catch a Star!" will remain long in the firmament, but it has brought us some bright new people and the promise of seeing them more happily situated soon. This show has many moments, but it needs many more.

New York Post

September 7, 1955

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Week Opens With a New Revue

Since the recent revival of "The Skin of Our Teeth" must be regarded as a special summer dividend for playgoers, it can be said that the new theatrical season began last night with the opening at the Plymouth of an intimate revue called "Catch a Star!" The new revue is no masterpiece of its difficult school, but it has the advantage of several brightly humorous ideas, possesses pace and vitality in both its sketches and dances, and offers a number of pleasant and enviably energetic performers, most of them talented and all of them enthusiastic. The sum total of the evening is a fresh, engaging and diverting little entertainment.

One of its chief virtues is that Danny and Neil Simon have written for it several genuinely amusing items in the almost lost field of the topical sketch, many of them dealing with the theater. There is, for example, an excellent number about a group of gossipy women playgoers and a long-suffering male at a matinee performance of "Damn Yankees." There is fun, too, in a sketch wherein the technique of the theater is introduced into the restaurant business. Naturally, there is also some satirical comment on the prevalence of the Marlon Brando school of acting.

Character Sketch

While the majority of the revue's sketches do concern themselves, and quite entertainingly, with the idiosyncracies of show business, the happiest among the contributions of the Simonses is one that forgets about such topical concerns and goes in for the loftier matter of authentic character humor. It is called simply "Arty," and deals with the determination of a stubborn mother to get her reluctant son a wife. Without losing its status as a revue number or neglecting the requisite blackout, it achieves humor and maintains real characterization, too.

Turning to the musical numbers, I enjoyed most an odd song by Ray Golden, Sy Kleinman and Phil Charig called "Gruntled"—"scrutible" comes into the lyrics, also—which is danced by Helen Halpin and a disconsolate-looking fellow named Denny Desmond, together with three other couples, in various curious and interesting postures. There is likewise humor of an agreeably wry sort in a song known as "The Story of Alice," in which four of her friends tell about how beautiful Alice is and proceed to turn the poor girl into a monstrosity.

The veteran of the cast is David Burns, an expert and reliable comic who never quite seems to get the credit he deserves. On the whole, I thought he was a little wasted here, although he has a couple of effective opportunities. His chief aide of the evening is an oncoming comedienne named Pat Carroll, who has a good grotesque sense of humor. I could have done without her version of O. Henry's "Gift of the Magi" story, but she is splendid as Arty's mother in my favorite sketch, and in various other episodes she is one of the revue's pillars of strength.

Among the other members of the cast, I especially liked Elaine Dunn, a pert and engaging song-and-dance girl, and Jack Wakefield, who is skillfully comic in most of the sketches and provides an authentic characterization as Arty. Then there should be room for another word about the grotesquerie of Denny Desmond in "Gruntled" and for Trude Adams' singing of a pleasant song by Norman Martin about foreign cars and the safety they provide for girls. The new revue has a nice sense of humor, and that's a welcome thing for a revue to possess.

New York Herald Tribune

September 7, 1955

THEATER

'Catch a Star!'

By WALTER F. KERR

It occurs to me that no one really wants to hear about a pleasant, lightweight, generally ingratiating show. The disastrously bad ones are fun to talk about, because the gags at their expense come fairly easy. The great ones are exciting to talk about because the season catches fire, Broadway shines brighter, and the race to the box office is an adventure in itself.

But there are such things as truly passable entertainments—shows that keep you happy enough without making you want to wire your mother—and I think the new revue at the Plymouth is one of them.

• • •

"Catch a Star" announces in its opening chorus that once the curtain has parted there are going to be a million stars on view. The curtain does sweep to the portals, and there high up on Ralph Alswang's spun-glass facade is an array of twinkling lights. There aren't a million of them. There are—if I counted correctly—fifty-seven. But even fifty-seven makes a reasonably warm glow.

The show itself is something like that. Its dozen or so young and upcoming performers—not counting the rasping presence of veteran clown David Burns—have enough energy to keep you from wool-gathering back to "As Thousands Cheer." They have, in fairly frequent flashes, a perfectly genuine satirical bent. They aren't all going to be the toasts of the town tomorrow morning. But do they have to be, to deserve a visit?

• • •

Comedienne Pat Carroll is an excellent case in point. Miss Carroll walks on, with unexpectedly sad eyes, in a brief introductory gambol to say a single line. She's on long enough for you to notice. A few minutes later she's herding a party of talkative hens into the balcony for a performance of "Damn Yankees." Though the format of the sketch is extremely familiar, Miss Carroll's bossy, knowing, finally tearful management of the group has a nice ring of character accuracy about it. ("Tom is stupid, selfish and arrogant. Now I'll tell you my side of the story.")

• • •

Thereafter you will find the girl—she's a blonde with hefty shoulders and a very fast way with a gesture—doing merciless justice to a Southern belle in a switch on the Tennesee Williams parodies, building hilarity out of nothing much more than random noise in a joke about the motion picture "Marty," and gruefully examining the torsos of males made available by a Matrimonial Agency ("I'd like to buy him—but ooh, my mother'd kill me!").

In every one of these Miss Carroll has a shrewd, darting, to-the-point attack. After three or four of them, you're convinced the girl can do anything. And that the girl can do anything. And that, you suddenly realize, is her single problem. In the process of doing everything, and doing everything differently, she has never quite settled for a single personality of her own. Stardom may miss her by just that much, as things stand. But as things stand, she's still fun.

• • •

She has good, if not altogether spectacular, company. Mr. Burns is, as always, a droll, deft man to throw into anybody's sketch, delightful as he presses his fingers to his eyes and listens to the rich, rolling prose of a superior dinner menu, irrationally entertaining as he simply relishes a movie title ("Love Is a Many Splendored Thing") as though it were right out of Keats.

Among the undergraduates, Trude Adams has a wholly disarming freshness as she sings two of the evening's better tunes (Phil Charig's "To Be or Not To Be in Love" and Norman Martin's lament, "Foreign Cars") and I thought she was never more appealing than when she was reaching, modestly but candidly, for a lyric she'd completely forgotten.

It's nice to watch dancer Elaine Dunn do a little neglected tap for a change—complete with a set of old-fashioned billowing spins—and wrestle out a rowdy romance on a stepladder. Marc Breaux makes an attractive solo flight out of the "To Be or Not To Be" melody, and if Lee Sherman's group choreography had been a little less makeshift Mr. Breaux might have come a little more emphatically into his own. Helen Halpin and Jack Wakefield are reliable supporting clowns, and I found myself mesmerized by a quartet doing a genteel ditty about a girl who was beautiful but whose nose was so red and graphic that it succeeded in stopping traffic.

Things do go wrong with "Catch a Star." The first act finale in a mambo-style divorce court is dismal; a couple of the sketches disappear before your eyes; the scenery is, on the whole, too economical. But for about seventy per cent of the time the going is agreeable. What do you call something that falls between a flop and a smash?

The New York Times

September 7, 1955

Theatre: Little Revue

Season On With 'Catch a Star!' at Plymouth

By BROOKS ATKINSON

LIFE begins after intermission for "Catch A Star," which opened a new season at the Plymouth Tuesday evening. This is the part of the program in which Pat Carroll and Jack Wakefield do a funny parody of a wonderful movie called "Marty."

Wait a few moments and Trude Adams, a singer of excellent voice and spirit, calls attention to the relatively high moral standards of European automobiles: They are too cramped for necking, she says in a lively tune. Almost immediately another good singer, Helen Halpin, does something genuinely witty with a song entitled "Gruntled." The dame she is impersonating is exuberantly gruntled because her new boy friend is ept, couth and kempt.

•

Next comes David Burns, the old pro, in a loud cartoon of a matrimonial agency where husbands are sold to fickle wives like Dior numbers. For years Mr. Burns' belligerent attitude toward any comic subject has consoled a lot of interior material. This sketch by Danny and Neil Simon gives him something substantially funny to work with.

Most of "Catch a Star!" however, is a good deal less enjoyable. Most of the first act, in fact, is thin and dull. Despite Mr. Burns' roaring, his professional irritability and his unlighted cigar, the first sketches are confused and pointless. And nothing makes much impression across the footlights until Wayne Sherwood, a young man with a first-rate baritone voice, sings a commonplace cowboy song with notable conviction.

Add in the credit column another number sung by Miss Adams, "To Be or Not to Be in Love," and also a wry and devastating anthem, called "The Story of Alice," which a quartet sings skillfully.

•

If Elaine Dunn could sing with magic or loveliness, Jerry Bock's "Fly Little Heart" might seem completely enchanting. But "Catch a Star!" is not loaded with talent. Even Miss Carroll, who is popular with television audiences, does not have a bold enough technique to come alive in the theatre except in the sketch with Mr. Wakefield.

This is a revue that has aspired above its station. After the intermission it puts its best foot forward for a solid half hour of good entertainment. But it subsides into mediocrity again, looking very much like the traditional first show of the season. Pleasant for friends, no doubt, but not for a stranger.

"The Skin of Our Teeth"

New York Post

August 18, 1955

By Richard Watts Jr.

Revival of 'The Skin of Our Teeth'

Thornton Wilder's cosmic vaudeville show, "The Skin of Our Teeth," may have been overrated by some of its more hysterical admirers when it was first presented in 1942, but it is one of the imaginative and invigorating works of the American stage, and it was good to see it revived so pleasantly at the ANTA Theater last night. This, it may not be necessary to recall, is the production that was sent to Paris earlier in the summer as a contribution to our "Salute to France" program, and it has such eminent performers as Helen Hayes, Mary Martin and George Abbott in its leading roles. I thought all of them were in commendable form.

If one is so ungracious as to start picking among the stars of the evening, I should say that it is Miss Martin who scored the major triumph. As Sabina, the hired girl, the eternal symbol of predatory sex appeal in human history, the heroine of "South Pacific" and "Peter Pan" has the role that many observers had thought only Tallulah Bankhead, who created the part, could portray in the curious comic terms in which Mr. Wilder wrote it. But Miss Martin, who has just the mocking gusto necessary to bring it within the scope of her own highly personal style, provides the enlivening quality that is necessary to both the character and the play.

Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus

This is certainly not to slight the contributions to the evening of Miss Hayes and Mr. Abbott. As the eternal wife and mother, the helpmate of the man who invented the wheel and the alphabet, Miss Hayes has the sort of "What Every Woman Knows" role that she has made her own, and, as usual, she plays it admirably, despite the temptations toward smugness that she faces from time to time. Mr. Abbott, returning to acting after many years of directing other performers, is quite effective as George Antrobus, who is Mr. Mankind in the Wilder parable. In lesser parts, Don Murray and the charming Heller Halliday are entirely helpful.

If I seem to be putting off as long as possible talking about the play, I guess it is because of an instinctive feeling that it will be difficult to describe to anyone who doesn't already know what it is about. The best I can do is to say that "The Skin of Our Teeth" is Mr. Wilder's symbolic history of the human race, complete with gags. In his antic way, the author brings a dinosaur, a mammoth and Moses into a New Jersey living room, transfers the biblical deluge to Atlantic City in convention time, and introduces Cain as the maker of wars to give us a serio-comic parable about the indestructibility of man's determination to survive and flourish.

Serious and Comic

Some of "The Skin of Our Teeth" is frankly comic, some is filled with philosophical earnestness, and all of it has a serious basis in the author's firm belief in the stubborn gallantry of mankind's destiny, despite our weaknesses and sins. To a large extent, it seems to me that he is successful in combining burlesque, satire, seriousness, philosophical contemplation and dramatic forcefulness in a parable that is essentially a tribute to the human spirit. Yet there also are times when it is my impression that he is just a little too arch for complete comfort.

There are uncomfortable occasions when the humor leaves you with the feeling that it represents a serious-minded teacher trying to frolic with his students and impress them that he is one of the boys. At other times, his determination to be philosophical sounds like a comedian attempting to prove that he can play Hamlet. Happily, "The Skin of Our Teeth" is, in general, much better than these moments of doubt might seem to suggest. For, whatever its weaknesses, it is a brave, intelligent and provocative play, and an honor to the American theater.

"THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH"

Drama by Thornton Wilder; staged by Alan Schneider; settings by Lester Polakov; costumes by Helene Pons; lighting by Feder; produced by Robert Whitehead; revived by the American National Theatre and Academy at the ANTA Theatre, August 17, 1955, with the following cast:

Announcer.....Earl George
Sabina.....Mary Martin
Mr. Fitzpatrick..Paul Morrison
Mrs. Antrobus.....Helen Hayes
Dinosaur.....Vinie Burrows
Mammoth.....Patricia Taffe
Telegraph Boy...Fred Kareman
Gladys.....Heller Halliday
Henry.....Don Murray
Mr. Antrobus.....George Abbott
Doctor.....Frank Hamilton
Professor....Jonathan Anderson
Judge.....Frank Silvera
Homer.....Howard Fischer
Miss E. Muse.....Eileen Lear
Miss T. Muse..Frances Sternhagen
Miss M. Muse....Maud Scheerer
Drum Majorette....Norma Veney
Drum Majorette.....Alice Fay
Lifeguard.....Charles Boaz
Fortune Teller...Florence Reed
Crying Woman.....Emily Cobb
Miss Orange Grove..Ann Stanwell

DAILY NEWS

August 18, 1955

'Skin of Our Teeth' Sophomoric, But It Still Is Lively Theatre

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Thornton Wilder's comedy, "The Skin of Our Teeth," is just as sophomoric, as windy and as irritating as it was when it was first produced in 1942—but even so, it still is lively theatre.

The American National Theatre and Academy brought it back last evening at the ANTA Theatre, and once again the play evoked some grandly skittish performances. But, as Tallulah Bankhead once remarked about another play, there is less to it than meets the ear. Such wisdom as it has, as it contemplates the human race for an hour and a half or so, is strictly undergraduate, and only the funny parts of it are maturely conceived.

This is the play which ANTA decided to fire off as a "salute to France" early in the summer, as representing something important and impressively profound in modern American drama. Most fortunately for us, ANTA was able to ship to Paris a cast containing Helen Hayes, Mary Martin and Florence Reed, who are numbered among our most artful players; and still most fortunately for us, this company now is in New York.

Solemn Pretence

A great deal of solemn stuff has been written about the Wilder play. By now everybody knows that the professor has given humanity a brisk run-through, starting with the dawn of the ice age, giving a nod to The Flood and bringing mankind down to the end of the last war—the most recent war, whenever that was—and leaving it where it started, in a terribly small-town house in a terrible small New Jersey town. All the solemn stuff, Wilder's, is pretentious nonsense. As a scenario, "The Skin of Our Teeth" seems to be the work of an elderly undergraduate.

But not all of it is highflown guff, or it wouldn't have lasted this long. Nor would we take pleasure, as I did last evening, in the performances of a generally new cast of characters. Mmes. Martin, Hayes and Reed and their bland playmate, George Abbott, wouldn't be so enjoyable if Wilder hadn't written something enjoyable for them to act. Wilder is at his best—and so, therefore, are his actors—when he is exposing the familiar frailties of our nature. He is at his worst—and so are his actors—when he thinks he is writing something important.

Acting Highlights

Enjoyment, therefore, comes only in fits and starts and it is not cumulative, which makes "The Skin of Our Teeth" an irritatingly bad play. But the enjoyment must not be overlooked—Miss Martin flouncing around and cracking wise as the all-time housemaid; Miss Hayes having the strength and weakness of the all-time mother; Miss Reed smoking a pipe and foretelling doom to the world in the most fascinating bass voice to be heard on the stage today, and Abbott genially portraiying the all-time stumblebum, Man himself.

The production, directed by Alan Schneider and set by Lester Polakov, is continuously and quite maddeningly whimsical. But that is what Wilder ordered in the first place. I'm happy to report that, before manufacturing "The Skin of Our Teeth," the professor did settle down and write "Our Town."

Journal American

August 18, 1955

Wilder Play Is a Delight

Helen Hayes, Mary Martin Head Cast With Superb Portrayals

By JOHN McCLAIN

THERE were serious misgivings, 'round and about, when the decision was made to send Thornton Wilder's "The Skin of Our Teeth" to Paris as a representative American drama for the Salute to France Festival.

True, the cast would have the services of Helen Hayes, Mary Martin, George Abbott and Florence Reed; Robert Whitehead could be relied upon to give it thoughtful production, and certainly Alan Schneider would be a capable director.

But the thought was frequently expressed that such an anachronistic and, to many Americans, utterly baffling allegory of man's struggle through the ages might well have been replaced by something truly indigenous to our country, like "Abe Lincoln in Illinois." After viewing the proceedings, which opened at the ANTA Theatre last night for a limited run, I am inclined to disagree.

I found it to be a delightful evening in anybody's theatre, including the French, and I will even go further to say that it has probably made more impression abroad, on the basis of its cleavage from recognized theatrical forms and with the resounding note of triumph over adversity (especially in these parlous times), than most of the orthodox and popular tributes to our national eminence. Here the drum is being beaten for humanity, not necessarily the U. S. brand, and the impact is correspondingly important.

For it is an age-old story of survival of the species, but it is told through Wilder's special medium. Mr. Antrobus is man, and he lives with his wife, who is the eternal woman, and two children, and a maid, who is the eternal temptress. They live in a modest home in Excelsior, N. J., and a large segment of the history of the world to date takes place in these surroundings, in Atlantic City at convention time, and through the medium of loud speakers, asides to the audience, news reel clips, trick scenery and effects.

Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus are thus shown to have survived ice age, the threat of beasts, flood, famine and war. They escape everything by the skin of their teeth and remain basically the same: somehow the mother runs the home and keeps it going; the father succeeds, makes some small dent in the world's progress, falters, goes to war, but emerges again with hope for the future.

It's a big order, all this, but I think Mr. Wilder has kept in fair focus the generic qualities of his people, even though at times he seems to have been carried away by his stylized format.

It is all very startling, for instance, for a character suddenly to stop the show, turn to the audience and say something like, "You know, I don't understand a word of this play!" Seems to me he runs the obvious risk of getting a general rejoinder from the audience: "Neither do we!"

But in this instance it doesn't seem to matter, due in great measure to the engaging performances of Miss Hayes as Mrs. Antrobus and Miss Martin as Sabina, the maid. Miss Hayes has effected a stolid walk and a manner of speech typical of housewives through the ages and, among other things, she delivers an endearing political speech in the finest Helen Hokinson tradition.

Mary Martin is of course superb, a rather more wholesome Talullah Bankhead, who played the part originally, yet sultry enough to give belief to her perpetual threat to the institution of marriage.

George Abbott, looking like Gary Cooper and wearing a lavish divot on his head, proved once again that he cannot only direct and write—he can act. Florence Reed

was suitably ominous as the fortune teller.

Other strong assists were turned in by Don Murray, Heller Halliday (Miss Martin's daughter), Frank Silvera and most of the large and luminous cast. Lester Polakov's intricate flying scenery and effects also performed notably.

It isn't really necessary to be too analytical about "Skin" —you may not understand, or necessarily agree with everything that goes on—but my guess is you'll like it.

The New York Times

August 18, 1955

Theatre: 'The Skin of Our Teeth' Is Revived

Wilder's Play of 1942 Staged at ANTA

By BROOKS ATKINSON

WHAT'S good enough for the French is good enough for us. "The Skin of Our Teeth," which was acted at the Paris Festival last month, opened at the ANTA Theatre Wednesday evening.

It is perfect. For Helen Hayes and Mary Martin play it not only with spirit but with religious understanding. And what Thornton Wilder had to say about the human race in 1942 seems more profound and admirable today.

Possibly we have all grown up to it in the intervening years. What was abstract philosophy then has become a painful part of our experience. And Mr. Wilder's celestial vaudeville has become the story of mankind. We may have understood it intellectually then, but it is deep in our bones now and it weighs on the conscience of the world.

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Miss Hayes and Miss Martin are great in their parts—the one the mother of the human race; the other, the symbol of gaiety and abandon. Technically they are superb actresses. The play is a little difficult—part drama, part allegory and now and then burlesque. For Mr. Wilder keeps a fistful of Indian clubs whirling through the air.

But as Mrs. Antrobus, Miss Hayes follows all the changes of mood with flexibility and grace. She inhabits the play as if she were making it up as it goes along. Superb technique because it is so instinctive that she can forget it! And so with Miss Martin. As the rowdy, raucous Sabina who tags along with the human race without thinking much about it, Miss Martin gives a brilliant comedy performance that weaves in and out of the story without effort—now kidding the play, now taking part in it as a full-fledged character, but never losing control of the work as a whole.

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They are great performers. But this column would like to suggest that there is something beyond skill in their acting. For they, too, have lived through thirteen years of the anguish Mr. Wilder was writing about in 1942, and, like the rest of us, they, too, have come through by the skin of their teeth. They recognize the truth of this cosmic fable, ing about in 1942, and, like They make Mr. Wilder's literary lines glow with human feeling. Where the spirit of the play is great, the acting is great, also. Not that Miss Hayes and Miss Martin give dedicated performances. "The Skin of Our Teeth" is comedy and they pitch into it like comediennes with a light touch, a sense of fun and also a friendly feeling towards the audience.

Everybody is in high fettle. Alan Schneider's direction is buoyant and inventive. As Mr. Antrobus, George Abbott, the song-and-dance maestro, gives a pleasant and knowing performance—a little small vocally, but big enough in understanding. As the fortune-teller, Florence Reed repeats her ominous, measured, ironic performance in the original production. Don Murray, as the sinister son, and Heller Halliday, as the irresponsible daughter, give excellent performances.

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Lester Polakov has designed satisfactory, impromptu scenery; and Helene Pons has dressed the actors in a mixture of homey and carnival costumes. The engagement is limited to three weeks. For the really creative things in the theatre frequently have to be squeezed into odd corners of the Broadway season. We get them only by the skin of our teeth.

Daily Mirror

August 18, 1955

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

Skin of Our Teeth Is a Gala Event

• Hayes, Martin, Reed and Abbott shoot off sparks in a refreshing novelty.

The season of 1955-56 got away to a star-studded start at the ANTA Theatre Wednesday evening, when a distinguished first-night audience had the privilege of seeing the revival of "The Skin of Our Teeth," prepared by Robert Whitehead as part of the U. S. Salute to France.

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IN HONOR of the occasion, to welcome home Helen Hayes, Mary Martin, George Abbott and Florence Reed from abroad, there was even a four-piece orchestra enlivening things in the lobby of the handsome, air-conditioned playhouse. It was a gala event.

An informal poll that we've taken over recent months proved, to our amazement, that a startling number of literate playgoers consider this Thornton Wilder work the best of the modern crop. It is novel and exciting, but we are still an "Our Town" man. And, for that matter, a Jean Giraudoux fan, too.

"The Skin of Our Teeth," as those of you who glimpsed it originally with Tallulah Bankhead, Frederic March and Florence Eldredge co-starred may recall, is a tribute to man's ability to survive the ice age, flood and war. And a tongue-in-cheek commentary on his idiocies.

No play in recent years baffled more theatre-goers than did this one when it was first presented. Not because what Wilder has to say isn't simple enough, but rather because he throws ideas at you from so many angles, via just about every technical resource man has invented, along with the alphabet, the wheel, the multiplication tables, bathing beauty contests and bingo.

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IT SEEMED TO US last evening that Alan Schneider's direction and the interpretations of the Misses Hayes, Martin, Reed and Mr. Abbott have clarified a brilliant stunt that constantly tosses mental curves across the plate from a tricky mound. Miss Hayes, as the Mrs. Antrobus who won marriage for women 5,000 years ago, is sensible, determined and eloquent as occasions permit.

Miss Martin, as the siren always threatening family ties, is saucy, sexy and electric. Miss Reed, as a sardonic Cassandra, uses her opportunity to show our youth why many of us veterans rate her one of our all-time greats. And Abbott, as the intelligent and humanly fumbling Mr. Antrobus, is again acting with the skill he displayed before he became the eminent producer-author-director.

Heller Halliday and Don Murray, as the Antrobus children, symbols of maternity and violence, are good, too. Young Miss Halliday, who happens to be Miss Martin's gifted daughter, gets prettier every time we see her, and is developing notable histrionic quality.

LESTER POLAKOV has designed flexible props which, used against backstage walls and drapes, give fluidity and atmosphere to Wilder's cosmic vaudeville show without ever getting in the way. Perhaps more playwrights will realize that it doesn't take truckloads of scenery to project effectively a stimulating play. The Greeks and the Elizabethans knew that.

"The Skin of Our Teeth" is a provocative novelty. It shoots off sparks of eternal verity. What you make of them is up to you. For us, they add up to an amusing and thoughtful evening of theatre. You will get as much from it as you bring to it. We are of the opinion that you'd better bring quite a lot. And what a pleasure it is to have Hayes, Martin, Reed and Abbott—magnificos all—back with us again. They are admirable antidotes for heat and humidity.